

I published article by Muslim from Iran in my Jan 2009 e-journal. When that came out, I asked SPS exec to invite a Muslim in 2011.

History of the West is often told about the rich and powerful and since we were a popular movement of the working poor, we could not see ourselves in what we were taught. What about stuff from Shane and lack of social engagement?

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North American Pentecostal Reflections on Postmodernity

Introduction

I must say that reading the Edinburgh 2010 Commission III document on postmodernity was an authentic postmodern encounter. The framers of this document concede that their report is not “structured” but rather “flashes and glimpses of the issues” which is not simply a commentary on their process but their version of postmodernities. Speaking metaphorically, my first reaction was how would this team manage the cross-cultural dimensions of Noah’s Ark? However, I read later in the document that they are theoretically capable of rebuilding a Bosnian Mosque.¹

Please note that while the Edinburgh 2010 Commission III report may often be quite fluid, it yet firmly rejects Christian mission that is not “holistic” a requirement if it is to be “valid and relevant”. “It is always proclamation, dialogue and action in service for justice; it is always word and deed.” This is more apparent where we are told that the Bible is “no longer seen as an infallible guide” since “oppression is not only due to abuse of the biblical texts, but is inherent in the texts themselves.”²

I, for one, would be cautious about suggesting that oppression is part of the theological intent of scripture. I noticed that male language is used of God in the Edinburgh 2010 document.³ I was one of the architects of the 2000 WARC – Pentecostal dialogue report entitled “Word and Spirit, Church and World” that insisted on inclusive language for God. Do the framers of the Commission III report not view such language as oppressive?

There is also irony here in that the framers call for both “word and deed” which is actually a hallmark of Pentecostal spirituality. Notice the warning about abuse of scripture when pitting John 3:16 for the Lausanne Movement over against the WCC attraction to Luke 14:18-19.⁴ This

¹ “Mission and Postmodernities,” Section 7, *Edinburgh 2010: Witnesses to Christ Today*, Volume 2, edited by Daryl Balia and Kirsteen Kim (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2010), p. 83.

² “Mission and Postmodernities,” 5:4, p. 79, 6:4, p. 81.

³ “Mission and Postmodernities,” 5:2, p. 77.

⁴ “Mission and Postmodernities,” 5:4, p. 79.

is of interest in part because Pentecostals have been quite literal about bringing in the “poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame” (Luke 14:21, NRSV) as well as going “out into the roads and the country lanes and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled” (Luke 14:23, NRSV).

The Edinburgh 2010 Commission III report has this to say about Pentecostals:

Pentecostalism ... although having strong pre-modern characteristics, might be said to be in part a postmodern phenomenon, insofar as it has existed on the fringe of modernity, frowned upon by the established church as well as secular society. Nevertheless, it proved adaptable, not the least due to its fluid or plastic nature, antedating the whole discussion around postmodernities. It may, therefore, be more successful than most churches in addressing postmodern concerns.⁵

I should say that in the sense that Classical Pentecostalism has been ridiculed, marginalized and suppressed by colonizers from Magisterial Christianity and in the USA by particular Evangelicals that there is some merit to the concept that we seek liberation. It was no small challenge for me to do a Ph.D. on Pentecostal pneumatology in the 1970s. When I tried to start a Pentecostal group at the American Academy of Religion in 1984, I was told that we were not allowed to have our own voice but others could speak for us. My early ecumenical work in the 1980s was drowned out by voices from outside the Pentecostal Movement.

Perhaps this idea in the Edinburgh 2010 report is like trying to square a circle because on the one hand the Pentecostal church of my youth broke new ground in breaking Jim Crow Laws yet we very much lived in a sub-culture given many names like Victorian, Puritanical, pre-Chalcedonian, sub-modern, etc. The label varied according to the outside ‘expert’. However, in terms of technology we were quick to adapt to loudspeakers on the top of cars, radio, tv and even distributed tracts by throwing them out of little airplanes. And today during a Sunday morning worship service, some are emailing, texting, tweeting, and facebooking even if they are not watching a hologram, making their own virtual church or viewing a cyberchurch on an iPhone or iPad. I am quite sure that the latter is not being true to our heritage from Azusa St., the Welsh Revival, Pandita Ramabai in India, and our other fathers and mothers.

Pentecostalism and the charismatic movement have unwittingly been radically influenced by Gutenberg's invention making possible the world-wide parade of Bibles, along with the proliferation of defiant commentators, spawned, in part, by Luther's idea of direct access to God. Thus this group helps define the expression from “Gutenberg to Google” that explores concepts like cyberchurch and even cyber-Eucharist which prompts the question of whether we would be well served by a compassionate version of “China’s Great Firewall”.

⁵ “Mission and Postmodernities,” 5:2, p. 77.

I appear to some as a living dinosaur. My father's generation knew about brush arbors and graduated to the sawdust trials with tent revivals. They faced threats by people with guns, knives, fire, hangings, poison, whips, brute force, etc., although this does not compare to what is still going on with Pentecostals around the world as we still have martyrs. It is possible that the first Pentecostal martyr in the U.S.A. was killed by police in 1918 due to his commitment to pacifism.⁶

Have you ever met someone raised in Pentecostal revival services where 'everything was moving but the pews'? Well, sometimes I saw the pews move. *The Live Coals of Fire* started in 1899 shows that B.H. Irwin appointed African-American W.E. Fuller a ruling elder. In 1904 Fuller wrote to J.H. King's *Live Coals* praising God for "the blood that cleans up, the Holy Ghost that fills up, the fire that burns up, and the dynamite that blows up." By 1905, Fuller, age 30, was one of three assistant general overseers to FBHC General Overseer J.H. King.

The 'radical' Pentecostal church in which I was raised kept us in church all the time from early in the morning and past midnight. We prayed, sang, preached, testified of miracles, etc. In terms of evangelism, we evangelized our own families and people who came to our churches which was true if they had already been baptized even by us.

My early years were spent witnessing on the streets, going house to house, handing out tracts at any opportunity, preaching revival services night after night, and so on that was not for the faint of heart. We were told that this was a sign of the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit and were driven with a sense of urgency so that the 'world may believe'. But not "believe" like the Edinburgh 2010 Commission III report 5:2 where one can be exclusivist, inclusivist, pluralist or whatever yet "earnestly desire all to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:4)".⁷

Did we get support from my other Christian brothers and sisters? Usually not. What I heard was "They are illiterate". Well, we memorized more Bible verses than many of them had ever read. I guess they never heard of a "sword drill". Did they not go to the funeral of the likes of Bishop B.E. Underwood and see the worn out Bible in the casket? I heard them say, "They don't have cathedrals". Okay, so we had brush arbors and hit the sawdust trail but this means only that we have something in common with the 'tree-churches' of Africa or the house churches of China, none of which it has been argued were foreign to churches of the 1st century. "They're weird!" Yes, we were taught that it was okay to be "peculiar" and that was worn as a badge of honor.

⁶ See Paul Alexander, *Peace to War: Shifting Allegiances in the Assemblies of God* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2009), pp. 136-137.

⁷ "Mission and Postmodernities," 5:2, p. 77.

Now even my Orthodox friend from Crete said we are really in post-postmodernity where people are returning to what has been proven true through the ages.

David Carter's study of Edinburgh, "The Edinburgh Missionary Conference Centenary" in *Ecumenical Trends* 39:3 concludes that "In the end unity and mission are one." This UK Roman Catholic says unity based on the John 17:21 should move to "so they may believe". Would this not be a compelling argument for Pentecostals who claim evangelism is a top priority and perhaps even the fifth mark of the Church? Carter is captivated with Christian Churches Together in England (CTE) even making flattering parallels to the intent of Edinburgh 2010 (p. 4).⁸

Here is a proposal from my paper to the August 2010 Pentecostal World Conference in Sweden. It is one thing for IPHC founder G.F. Taylor to say the Azusa message is a truth worth dividing the church but are current members of the Pentecostal World Conference willing to say they are global churches then shy away from their responsibility in pursuing various avenues of unity? For example, in the USA is it sufficient to participate in PFNA now PCCNA and NAE then PWF and various specialized groups of interest? Is CCT a substitute for NCCCUSA or another avenue? Is the Global Christian Forum an alternative or replacement for the World Council of Churches?⁹

The Edinburgh 2010 Commission III paper suggests that for some 9/11 may have destroyed much of the stuff of postmodernity. This seems unlikely as the USA in particular is a mixture of so many different contexts although many are not well represented in our media. Notice the move of Harvey Cox from *The Secular City* (1965) to *Fire from Heaven* (1994) once he realized Pentecostals ignored the thesis of his famous book. Of course now we have *The Future of Faith* (2009) where Cox portrays the Age of the Spirit as where Christians ignore dogma and embrace spirituality which advances his advocacy of major world religions and is quite compatible with the primary version of postmodernity advocated in the Edinburgh 2010 Commission III report.

"In many ways, although limited to affluent society, postmodernity represents the voice of marginalized people insisting on equal treatment, on their angle of approach and point of view being as valid as those traditionally favoured".¹⁰ Concerning the notion that the report's version of postmodernity is particularly linked to the affluent, I would say that is true in terms of the working poor church in which I was raised and which I have visited on five continents. In other words, social location is an issue in this discussion.

⁸ David Carter, "The Edinburgh Missionary Conference Centenary," *Ecumenical Trends* 39:3 (March 2010), pp. 4-5.

⁹ Harold D. Hunter, "The Nature and Mission of the Postmodern Church," paper read to the Pentecostal World Conference, August 26, 2010 in Stockholm, Sweden.

¹⁰ "Mission and Postmodernities," 2:2, p. 65.

On the other hand, I cannot endorse the concept represented in the report that appears to reduce Pentecostalism to what I have elsewhere called Enthusiastic Pneumatomania. These phenomena are not unique to Pentecostals and absolutely not true of many Pentecostals around the world. I will concede, however, that there is a strand of the Pentecostal Movement of which this is true and much like the Edinburgh 2010 Commission III report play down the ‘doctrinal’. There is no concern here that Buddha will supplant Jesus even though Dr. Yonggi Cho, founding pastor of Yoido Full Gospel Church, spoke at a Buddhist University some eight years ago. Also when the report tries to blur traditional lines that have defined salvation, remember that for some Pentecostals their call for unity is really one of uniformity built on the foundational concept that we are talking about Christians in the first place who will in time become Pentecostals.¹¹

Anyway, beware what you hope for when you supplant Christian theology with a nebulous concept of “authentic spirituality” as clearly there are forms of this search that would be rejected by the framers of the Edinburgh 2010 Commission III report. But have Pentecostals spawned more aberrations than German universities that I had to study as a seminary student in the 1970s? Do you really want more ‘tele-evangelists’? Apparently not as they quickly condemn “allegedly divinely appointed charismatic leader(s) of faith fellowships”.¹²

Brighton ‘91

I have reviewed the Edinburgh 2010 Commission III report from many different angles but in an attempt to be faithful to the assignment I would like to try and locate part of the discussion from a Pentecostal perspective. This can be illustrated by commenting on the first global conference for Pentecostal scholars known as Brighton ’91. It may be possible to consider this something of a Pentecostal narrative linked to “the Spirit blows where it wills” (John 3:8).

The Theology Track of Brighton ’91 was organized by Monsignor Peter Hocken and me. This concept cemented in my mind during a five year span where I traveled to 35 countries spread across five continents. In the late 1980s, I went to Geneva, Switzerland and spoke directly to Emilio Castro, then General Secretary of the WCC, asking to bring together Pentecostal scholars in conjunction with the upcoming WCC General Assembly known as Canberra ’91 with the theme “Come, Holy Spirit”.

¹¹ “Mission and Postmodernities,” Section 3, p. 71, 5:1, p. 75, 5:2, p. 76; Amos Yong, “From Azusa Street to the Bo Tree and Back: Strange Babblings and Interreligious Interpretations in the Pentecostal Encounter with Buddhism,” in *The Spirit in the World: Emerging Pentecostal Theologies in Global Contexts*, edited by Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 203-226; Harold D. Hunter, “Global Pentecostalism and Ecumenism: Two Movements of the Holy Spirit?” in *Pentecostalism and Christian Unity: Ecumenical Documents and Critical Assessments*, edited by Wolfgang Vondey (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010), pp. 20-33.

¹² “Mission and Postmodernities,” 6:2, p. 80, 6:1, p. 80.

When it became apparent that Canberra '91 was not going to cooperate with me, months later I went to the UK and met with Michael Harper and others to explain my vision and desire to link with their projected conference to be held at Brighton. They reluctantly agreed and eventually asked Peter Hocken to assist me with the program.

What we accomplished at Brighton '91 was unique in that it was the first such meeting for Pentecostal scholars brought together from six continents. In an effort to seek a balance between the Global North and Global South the conference was invitation only. We also provided simultaneous translation in four languages. Our presenters were Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Pentecostal, AICs and other Christian groups like 'house-churches'.

Although Peter Hocken vetoed my invitation to speakers like the legendary Frank Chikarne and others, we managed to tackle a wide range of topics such as the following:

1. Other Living Faiths
2. Liberation Theology
3. Social justice
4. Gender Equality
5. Apartheid
6. Salvation of all Creation
7. Physical Challenges
8. Martyrdom

The framers of the Edinburgh 2010 Commission III report identify the Church's prophetic role as struggling for peace and the integrity of creation and combating injustice. The framers also complain that some churches will not care about the environment because the earth will eventually perish. How does one explain that the founder of the original Earth Day was a Pentecostal?¹³

In the immediate aftermath of Brighton 91, I made these comments in an article published shortly after Brighton '91. This was part of my response to the *BEM* document that was published in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*.

Pentecostal ecclesiarchs should have some fears allayed by the healthy respect for Scripture evident in *BEM* and the absence of any trace of an arid academic enterprise of disaffected intellectuals. *Confessing The One Faith's* depiction of Nicene thought as "doxological" and "confessional" fits well in categorizing pentecostals over against the "historical-critical" preoccupation of Modernity. Tension between Pentecostalism and

¹³ "Mission and Postmodernities," 5:3, p. 78, 6:5, p. 82. See Harold D. Hunter, "Pentecostal Social Engagement: Excerpts From Around the World," Edinburgh 2010 Commission VII,.

Modernity has given rise to labels such as 'precritical' and 'submodern'. The theological orientation of pentecostal scholars unveiled at Brighton '91 may constitute a constructive theological proposal on equal footing with more widely publicized perspectives. A descriptive account of such would give voice to new insights for handling racism, sexism, socio-economic oppression, the environment, etc. Judging by *Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralist World*, the Brighton scholars may model a legitimate postmodern agenda. Primary dissenters will be sympathizers of Altizer's ethnocentric scheme narrowly defining postmodern culture as marked by a noticeable absence of God. Part of the rationale for utilizing this descriptive category is because postmodernity is a polyglot term that admits determinism, scientific hegemony, etc., have given way to contingency and relativism. It is not difficult to support Robert Bellah's multilingualism over against the metalanguage of science. The Brighton '91 model figures in because it is not unrelated to Peter Hodgson's material norm identified as liberation.¹⁴

Looking back on Brighton '91 and like conferences where I have participated or organized, I can say that I feel justified in applying postmodernity to this work. This is not simply a matter of the subjects that were addressed, but the way that they were handled. We did not use speakers from the Global North to speak for the Global South and tried to engender cross fertilization on any topic at hand while deliberating cultivating the considerable diversity of the Pentecostal Movement that is often unknown by observers.

Not every session met our lofty goals and that is apparent in the published papers yet this was the first event of its kind which meant to provide a model for others to follow. As it turns out, more often than not I ended up being an organizer or presenter in many such international events that would follow. In other words, Brighton '91 established a model that has been followed not only in terms of events but ongoing organizations that have taken shape in various continents. Contrast this with the admission of the Edinburgh 2010 Commission III report that they fell well short in this regard.¹⁵

Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter Here?

Is hope irreconcilable with postmodernity? When one goes to the Edinburgh 2010 Commission III report 4:1, one has to reckon with the possibility that postmodernity may surrender hope. I, for one, am not willing to do this and was glad to see a course correct later in the document where hope was invoked as necessary for transformation. However, earlier in the document they dismiss the related comments by David Kettle as modern not postmodern.¹⁶

¹⁴ Harold D. Hunter, "Reflections by a Pentecostalist on Aspects of BEM," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 29:3/4 (Summer/Fall 1992), pp. 323-324.

¹⁵ "Mission and Postmodernities," Section 7, p. 73.

¹⁶ "Mission and Postmodernities," 4:1, p. 72, Section 3, p. 71.

The Edinburgh 2010 paper says that postmoderns who wrote this paper give up such a notion and are more aligned with the New Testament.

As is natural with emerging movements, the organisational structure of the church in New Testament times is still fluid; there is not even yet a clearly defined borderline between Jews and Christians. Perhaps postmodernity, with its emphasis on life and experience rather than on structures and membership, is in many ways closer to New Testament ecclesiology than what can be said of some of the more traditional Christian positions?¹⁷

This is not a convincing argument for me when this logic then is taken to mean salvation outside the church. Whatever happened to theological discussions of election? Ah wait, postmoderns have little tolerance for theological discussions. Yet I cannot resolve such a critical issue simply by something like a phenomenological perspective. Here is the way I put it in my “Two Movements” article for Wolfgang Vondey’s 2010 book on Pentecostal ecumenism: “In whatever ways Pentecostals conceive of the Spirit outside the church, and however they might rightly engage in inter-faith conversations, they have generally not affirmed a ubiquitous salvific presence”.¹⁸

Also it seems that the writers of the Edinburgh 2010 paper believe in some truths whether absolute or not because they talk about trying to improve the world and not simply accepting things as they are. They obviously do not want to give up on hope or ignore those in poverty. In light of this paper, how does one categorize things like helping the poor, equal treatment of women, fighting racial discrimination, and so on? By the way, the firm position toward the end of the paper about their version of postmodernity I found at odds with the opening that seemed more receptive to other postmodernities.

Conclusion

My ecumenical journey has been one of a simple pilgrim seeking truth. I have no illusions about what John 17:21 means in this context but rather know that the wider the circle the more whole I am as a person. Although it may disappoint some, I will say without apology that I remain a Pentecostal Christian. However, allow me to define what this means as my journey continues to be enriched by my engagement of other Christians, other religions, and the whole of Creation.

¹⁷ “Mission and Postmodernities,” 5:2, p. 76.

¹⁸ Hunter, “Global Pentecostalism and Ecumenism,” p. 31. See Amos Yong, *Hospitality & The Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008).